



Pruning fruit trees in your home garden

A fruit tree is pruned so it will produce maximum yields over its entire life. Correct pruning develops a mechanically strong trunk and branches while thinning out less productive branches. This makes cultivation, spraying and harvesting easier.

Although you may prune whenever the tree is dormant, this operation is usually carried out in late winter or early spring, before growth starts.

Young trees

Pruning of saplings is a training process. Head a 1-year-old plant back at planting time to one-third of its total length, making the cut immediately above a good strong bud. This will cause the bud to elongate, and the next two lateral buds to form shoots. If the whip is not cut back, the terminal bud will grow and the lateral buds immediately below may remain dormant or form spurs.

When planting a 2-year-old tree, let the central shoot form the leader. The lateral branches are spaced 15-20 cm apart spirally round the trunk, starting 75 cm from the ground. Tip the leader back only slightly, but cut the lateral branches back to within 50-60 cm of the trunk to encourage branching. Never leave more than four branches at this time, and only if well placed; two or three are usually sufficient. To eliminate weak forks, choose branches with angles wider than 35°. Additional branches will grow from the leader during succeeding seasons.

Head the leader back slightly each season until the tree is 2-2.5 m tall and six to eight lateral branches have been produced to form the proper scaffold framework. With most varieties, the central leader will level out naturally, making removal unnecessary. However, in others, such as Delicious and Spy, severe pruning of the leader may be needed after the first heavy crop.

Bearing trees

Little pruning is needed, as heavy pruning prevents early bearing. Thin out the small branches to prevent crowding and shading. This will ensure free air circulation and reasonable penetration of sunlight to mature fruit evenly. Water-sprouts (soft, quick-growing, vertical shoots), crossing limbs, dead and diseased wood also should be removed. Occasionally, vigorous

branches may need cutting back to prevent the tree from becoming one-sided. Make cuts clean and close to the parent branch so that the wounds heal quickly. Paint wounds over 4 cm in diameter with a tree dressing.


Do not remove a branch unless necessary. Pruning reduces the number of energy-producing leaves, thus reducing the tree's vitality. All pruning has a dwarfing effect, but dormant pruning encourages the production of new growth. Maximum growth will occur close to the cut. Regular pruning keeps the correct balance between leaf and fruit production. Severe pruning, as when renovating old trees, upsets this balance and fruit production may be greatly reduced for 2 or 3 years.



Pruning a young apple tree — (Left) First year after planting as a 1-year whip, headed at 75 cm. (Right) The same tree, pruned and ready for the second growing season. Four scaffolds and a new leader were selected. The leader was pruned back a third, the laterals to about a half.

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